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Ethicists fear cloning of sheep heralds 'Brave New World'

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- Scientists hailed news of a 7-month-old lamb named Dolly conceived by cloning as a new threshold for promising research. Ethicists, meanwhile, were left pondering scary scenarios that the process which produced the genetic duplicate of a 6-year-old ewe could be used on humans.

The breakthrough announced by British scientists thrusts "a 'Brave New World' upon us," said Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

The allusion was to the science-fiction classic written by Aldous Huxley in 1932, describing a future one-world government in which science controls every aspect of human life. In "Brave New World," babies are artificially produced and conditioned by a totalitarian state and concepts like individualism and family no longer exist.

To clone the sheep, scientists altered cells from an adult ewe and fused them with 277 unfertilized sheep eggs from which the nuclei, which contain genes, had been removed. Only 29 fused eggs survived. They were implanted in surrogate mothers. One of the sheep became pregnant and gave birth to a lamb that was an exact duplicate of the adult donor.

Experts say the ability to clone animals will be of great benefit for livestock production and medical research. The down side is if cloning works with one mammal, which many scientists thought impossible, it likely will work with humans.

"As with so many of these breakthroughs in genetics, this one has enormous potential for evil and great promise for good," said University of Louisville ethicist Paul Simmons.

Such discoveries create an ethical gray area, into which some argue science should not encroach.

In a poll taken for ABC News' "Nightline," 53 percent of Americans accepted the cloning of animals for medical research. Eighty-seven percent, however, said cloning of humans should not be allowed.

"It is clear to me from a Christian perspective that under no circumstances of any kind would it ever be morally permissible to clone a human being," said ethicist David Gushee.

Gushee said he is less certain about whether even such research on animals represents a kind of "forbidden knowledge" that lies beyond the proper realm of science.

"It's an open question of whether human beings can be trusted with this kind of power," said Gushee, a professor at Union University in Jackson, Tenn. "Human history is full of a recurring pattern -- our ability to make use of every new scientific and technological innovation to harm one another as well as to help one another. There is the history of warfare, for example."

Cloning livestock is "obviously not" immoral, said Glenn McGee, professor of bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania and author of "The Perfect Baby," a book on cloning and genetic engineering.

"Hybridization and agricultural modification have been around as long as wheat," McGee said. "We wouldn't have corn if it weren't for hybridization." The cloning of livestock, he said, "would fall into that category."

Cloning could be used to produce hundreds of identical animals for use in cancer research, making the tests more efficient and thereby require fewer test animals, he said. It could help fight world hunger by producing more efficient animals at lower cost.

The technology already exists to "engineer" cattle so they produce human insulin. With the new discovery, whole herds of animals could be cloned to produce insulin for use by diabetics, McGee said.

Other "weird possibilities" have been suggested, he said, such as prolonging the life of family pets or reproducing endangered species to fight extinction.

Applying the process to humans, however, "is obviously immoral," McGee said. "You can't do research on a human child like this without consent," he said. By definition, a cloned child could give consent only after the experiment.

The procedure is also inefficient. "In order to get one cloned human, you'd have to go through thousands of embryos," McGee said.

Daniel Heimbach, associate professor of ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, said he has "no concern" about cloning animals. While some Christians might view that as intruding on God's intent in creation, Heimbach said, he views such oversight as keeping within God's "creation mandate" to rule over and subdue the earth.

"The real serious moral problem is the specter of what happens if you do this with human life," Heimbach said.

"Dealing with the genetic code seriously impacts the whole meaning of what it means to be in the image of God," Heimbach said.

New technology "puts within human grasp a huge new power, the power to change the blueprint of human life," Heimbach said.

Such tinkering "is an affront to God as creator of human life," Heimbach said, and "beckons men in their pride to insult the creator by changing the basic design of human life itself. It tempts men to become gods."

Simmons, a former professor at Southern Seminary, said cloning "offers the ultimate ego trip for the narcissists in our midst."

He does not think, however, that such research should be banned. "Where health concerns are involved, I think cloning offers some potential benefits," Simmons added.

"I happen not to be among those who are alarmist about this," Simmons said. "I do think thoughtful guidelines need to be developed to control these developments as best we can."

Simmons said he does not believe the Bible teaches a concept of forbidden knowledge. "The Scripture portrays those made in God's image as both curious and with a capacity for invention," he said.

"People are co-creators with God. God has shared knowledge and the capacity for gaining knowledge so that people might render a faithful stewardship of those awesome powers," Simmons said.

Simmons said the Christian community should be involved in questions new research raises about the nature and meaning of life but should not resist efforts to find cures for genetic diseases and disabilities.

"We cannot claim to love people if we are indifferent to or try to erect barriers to scientific breakthroughs for therapeutic knowledge," Simmons said.

President Clinton asked a national ethics board to review "troubling" implications of cloning.

Gushee applauded "rapid action on the part of the president" and called for "serious public oversight" of cloning research.

McGee, however, said rather than focusing narrowly on cloning, the president should "think more generally about reproduction."

Simply passing laws against cloning would be "superficial and mindless," McGee said. "Why not pass a law against living on Mars?" he said. "The goal should be to have a commission on the family and genetics," he said.

Right or wrong, now that the technique exists, it likely will be used by someone on humans, Simmons said. "I think it will happen, no matter what the rules or laws are."

Some point out that efforts by religion to suppress science never work. But Gushee said scientists, as well as theologians, have a moral imperative.

"Part of what it means to be human and to be responsible morally is to offer and engage in ethical reflection about the exercise of our ever-growing scientific and technological capacity," Gushee said.

"We need to spend money training scientists about ethics," McGee said. "Right now we do not spend a single dollar training research scientists to think about moral issues."

He said he fears an era is coming when scientists "do whatever they please," and ethicists are called in only after potentially dangerous discoveries. Asked by one reporter about dangers from cloning technology, McGee responded, "I shouldn't be the guy being asked this."

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Cloning puts new twist on theory of original sin

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- The possibility of cloning a person from only one parent puts a new twist on an old theory: original sin.

The doctrine, first espoused in the 5th century by Augustine, a bishop whom modern Catholics regard a saint, teaches that people are born guilty of sin because they inherit a fallen nature from Adam which is passed on through procreation.

"God, the Author of all natures but not their defects, created man good; but man, corrupt by choice and condemned by justice, has produced a progeny that is both corrupt and condemned," Augustine wrote.

Augustine believed specifically that inherited sin was passed on to descendants from their fathers in the act of procreation, which he called "concupiscence," or lust.

With cloning, however, it becomes possible for the first time to reproduce with only a mother. If sin is transmitted genetically from the male as Augustine suggested, is it possible to conceive a child untainted by original sin?

Fisher Humphries, a professor at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School, said cloning would raise questions for someone holding Augustine's view of human nature.

"I suppose if somebody held that concupiscence is the means of the transmission of original sin, they'd be really threatened by this," he said. However, he added, "I'm not sure a lot of people hold that view."

Some use Augustine's theory to explain how Christ's death on the cross atones for human sins. Since his mother was a virgin, they say, Jesus was born without inheriting a sinful nature from an earthly father. Because Christ was sinless, the reasoning goes, his death was acceptable to God as a sacrifice for sin.

Augustine believed baptism erased original sin and that even infants who died before they could be baptized were condemned to hell.

While many Protestants reject Augustine's view of infant baptism, his theory of original sin has remained standard for most Christians after the Reformation.

Martin Luther concluded that because of original sin, man cannot attain salvation by good works but must rely totally on God's grace.

John Calvin, a 16th century French reformer, taught that man is morally depraved, capable of doing only evil without God's help.

According to the Southern Baptist Convention's 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" statement, man "fell from his original innocence; whereby his posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin, and as soon as they are capable of moral action become transgressors and are under condemnation."

And in a sermon at the 1994 SBC pastors' conference, preacher Adrian Rogers called the virgin birth crucial to affirm Jesus is the Son of God.

"If Jesus was not born of a virgin, he is not sinless," Rogers said. "If he is not sinless, he is not worthy of the sinless sacrifice. If there's no sacrifice, there's no atonement. If there's no atonement, there's no new birth. Jesus was born of a virgin so that we might be born again."

In a 1983 book, "Believe Plus Nothing," prominent conservative pastor W.O. Vaught said the virgin birth meant Jesus did not inherit a propensity to sin.

"The lack of an old sin nature sets Christ apart from all other members of the human race," wrote Vaught, longtime pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. "He is the only human being ever born without an old sin nature. This is why the virgin birth is so important, or perhaps we should call it the virgin conception. The seed was from God and not from a man, and when that baby was born of Mary in Bethlehem, he was born without an old sin nature."

Many modern theologians, however, now dispute the theory of inherited sin. Augustine based his view on two Bible passages, scholars say.

One, Psalm 51:1, says, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." That verse speaks to "a common experience of sin that binds the generations together, but it does not mean that conception as such is peculiarly tainted with sin," wrote theologian Emil Brunner.

The other passage, Romans 5:12, was mistranslated by Augustine, who read the passage, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men in whom all men sinned" A better reading, scholars say, is "because" all men sinned rather than "in whom."

Romans 5:12, Brunner said, "does not refer to the transgression of Adam in which all his descendants share, but it states the fact that 'Adam's' descendants are involved in death, because they themselves commit sin."

Humphries, a Baptist theologian who formerly taught at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, said where the propensity to sin comes from is less important than the observation that sin pervades the human race.

"I think when we talk about fallen nature, the mode of transmission is not as important as the fact that human beings are self-absorbed, self-serving, all the things that keep us away from God and away from community," Humphries said.

Daniel Heimbach, associate professor of ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., said how sin is transmitted has no bearing on the significance of the virgin birth.

"The issue of whether original sin is passed on only by the male or female, that is speculation," Heimbach said, and is not addressed in the Bible.

"The virgin birth is in the Bible," Heimbach said. "The sinlessness of it is in the fact that the conception, that which starts to grow, is conceived by the Holy Spirit, not by human generation."

Ethicist lists 'things to think about' when thinking about cloning

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., offered a list of "six things to think about when you think about cloning."

1. Beware of those who issue shrill, negative predictions or promise a perfect future. "Extremists always distort the truth," he said.

2. Remember that the Lordship of Christ extends to all technological innovations. "We human beings may be coworkers with God in using cloning for good."

3. Let Jesus' command to love neighbor guide your thinking about cloning.

4. Understand that it takes parents to make a child and help them grow in grace. "A petri dish in a scientific laboratory cannot make a human being," Parham said.

5. Consider who will benefit most from cloning. "Will it advance human well-being or private gain at the expense of a good society?"

6. Be proactive by having church forums with community leaders and medical researchers to discuss all the implications of cloning.

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-- By Bob Allen

Foreign Mission Board reports record number of new missionaries

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board appointed a record 590 overseas mission workers in 1996, officials at the agency based in Richmond, Va., report.

With the 1996 appointees, Southern Baptist missionaries now work in 126 countries with 336 people groups and number about 4,200, the agency said.

Of the new missionaries, 262 were given long-term or "career" assignments, the largest number in nine years. On top of that, growing numbers of missionaries are serving shorter, two-year assignments overseas before committing themselves to missions careers.

The largest growth areas for workers came in what officials call "The Last Frontier," areas of the world where traditional missionaries are unwelcome, and Europe, according to a press release.

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-- By ABP staff

Richmond seminary earns accreditation

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond has been granted full accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools.

The Virginia school, which opened in 1991, completed the accreditation process as quickly as any school ever has, said President Tom Graves. The seminary has been an associate member of ATS since 1994, when it graduated its first class.

"This is a significant milestone in the life of our school," Graves said. "Accreditation from ATS demonstrates that experienced and objective observers find this seminary to be stable and enduring with a quality program of studies."

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-- By ABP staff

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please substitute this story for the earlier version released with the same headline Feb. 25. This updated version contains new information in the last six paragraphs.

FDA says birth control pills safe for 'morning-after' use (revised)

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Food and Drug Administration said Feb. 24 that specific doses of oral contraceptives can be used as "morning-after" birth-control pills.

The agency said that based on scientific evidence, certain oral contraceptives approved for daily use are "safe and effective" as emergency contraceptive pills.

"Although emergency contraception is not as effective as proper use of a regular contraceptive method, it substantially reduces the chances of becoming pregnant after unprotected sexual intercourse," the FDA said.

The agency released a prescription guide describing four regimens for using pills designed to prevent pregnancy as "morning after" pills. It calls for doses of two-to-four contraceptive pills up to 72 hours after intercourse, followed by the same dose 12 hours later.

The method is 75 percent effective in blocking a pregnancy. The pills work by blocking a fertilized egg from entering the uterus and won't work after the embryo is attached to the uterus. The main side effects are nausea and vomiting.

While doctors have long known that oral contraceptives could be administered in high doses to block pregnancies, few had access to specific information about manufacturers and dosage.

"The best-kept contraceptive secret is no longer a secret," said FDA Commissioner David Kessler. "Women should have the information this regimen is available. That's what we are about."

Advocates of the so-called "emergency contraception," which has been used for years in Europe, say it is useful for women who have been raped, whose birth control has failed or who acted in the heat of passion. It could prevent up to 2.3 million unintended pregnancies each year, one million of which now end in abortion, the FDA said.

Some opponents, however, view it as a form of abortion. "We consider life to begin from the very first moments," said Serrin Foster, president of Feminists for Life in American.

In a highly unusual move, the FDA issued its report independently and not at the request of drug manufacturers. The agency said it would encourage pharmaceutical companies to include dosage information on their labels but would not require them to do so.

A spokeswoman for one of two U.S. manufacturers of the pills said her company would not provide the information because of fear of lawsuits.

Baptist ethicist Daniel Heimbach said the action raises "serious concern" about the direction of the FDA under the Clinton administration.

"The role of the FDA is to evaluate and approve or disapprove drugs on the market in terms of their effect on human life," said Heimbach, a professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

The use of any drug to induce abortions "is completely ignoring the status of the conceived human life that is being aborted," he said.

"From my perspective, once you have a fertilized egg, you have the beginning of human life," added David Gushee, a professor at Union University in Jackson, Tenn. "The moral issues begin right then, so I must oppose easy availability of a morning-after pill."

Gushee said a morning-after pill represents a possible "transition on part of the abortion industry" by making it possible for women to end crisis pregnancies with "little or no medical consultation."

"If this becomes widely done, it will change the face of the abortion issue and quite likely entrench abortion even more in American life," Gushee said.

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-- By Bob Allen

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